DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 284 920 UD 025 647

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TITLE Education and Bias Related Violence. Presentation to the Governor's Task Force on Bias Related Violence (Buffalo, New York, April 10, 1987).
PUB DATE 10 Apr 87
NOTE 12p.
PUB TYPE Reports - General (140) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Aggression; *Bias; *Black Dialects; *Black Students; Coping; *Cultural Differences; Daily Living Skills; Elementary Secondary Education; *Lower Class; Males; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Response; Violence

ABSTRACT

Bias based on race, ethnicity, sex, color, class, or other characteristics is a problem nationally and internationally. Both overt and covert incidences occur in educational settings where most educators begin to work with little or no practical experience with the cultural groups they encounter in the student population. Thus the behaviors of these youngsters are often misinterpreted. Streetcorner youngsters, lower class males, and especially black lower class males who are very often targets of this discrimination have developed and refined certain rules, rituals, and techniques to survive ethnocentrism. If educators were more cognizant of these behaviors, misinterpretations and discrimination could be lessened. Teachers, school staff, and administrators must become more aware of these lifestyle characteristics of streetcorner people: (1) language; (2) mode of dress; (3) running a game; (4) aggression; (5) physicalness; (6) putting someone down; (7) the put-on or front; (8) playing the cat or gorilla, (i.e., sweet-talking someone, and if that approach fails, yelling to get what one wants); and (9) the importance of dramatic style. Policies should be made on a statewide basis to deal with all forms of ethnocentrism and all State employees should be required to take courses which tend to lessen bias. The State should publicize and reward successful programs and activities of an interracial nature. New curriculum materials which promote acceptance should be developed. (VM)

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7-2-87

Buffalo, New York

April 10, 1987

ED284920

Presentation to

THE GOVERNOR'S TASK FORCE ON BIAS RELATED VIOLENCE

Concerning

EDUCATION AND BIAS RELATED VIOLENCE

by

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UD025647

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Chairman White and members of the Task Force our thanks for serving as part of such an important study and for having open hearings around the state. However, there should have been more publicity concerning the open hearings. I found out about the hearings while listening to the radio yesterday.

Historically, bias related violence has always been present internationally and nationally. Such violence is often based on race, ethnicity, shades of color, tribe, sex, state, province, class, or religion. Any good newspaper on any day will have a few articles attesting to such behavior.

In America, H. Rap Brown, in his book *Die Nigger Die!*, wrote that violence is as American as is apple pie and ice cream. Indeed, in addition to our country being born from a revolution, we have experienced political, economic, racial, religious, ethnic, anti-radical, police, and personal violence as we have grown and developed.

Personally, as a Jewish boy growing up in Boro Park in Brooklyn, New York, I experienced negative aggression and bias related violence. When my friends and I walked into or through another neighborhood, we usually had words with or fought with the group living in that area, for example, Italians, Irish, or Scandinavians. Very often when we went up to the Polo Grounds to see our *Bums*, the Brooklyn Dodgers, play the Giants, black kids chased us attempting to get money or our watches.

When I enlisted into the US Army at the close of WW II,

interestingly, a few times GI's from, in particular, Texas and Oklahoma walked around me looking me over. Later, I found out that, though they had never seen a Jew before, they were looking for my tail and horns because they heard that Jews had them.

When I was assigned to the occupation of Japan with the 24th [Hawaiian] Division, quite often white and Hawaiian Americans fought. Indeed, both sides fought with those from their group who they felt were too friendly with those of the other group.

Now I want to talk about education and overt and covert related violence.

Most teachers begin their careers with very little, if any, course work or practical experience regarding how to work with other than middle-class white students. However, most schools, especially in urban areas, have students from culturally different minority groups. These students may be poor, black, Hispanic, a recent immigrant, or a member of some other minority group. While some of these students behave in a middle-class way, others behave in a streetcorner way. Usually, in an inner-city classroom, *only* two or three students in a class of 30 are *streetcorner* youngsters who often behave in a streetcorner way. Indeed, there are at least four distinct groups of children in inner city classrooms.[1]

In many urban areas because educators do not understand this streetcorner youngster's behavior, teacher's feel he

represents the majority of students. Furthermore, because of the teacher's misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the streetcorner youngster's behavior, these youngsters are often subjected to the Emmett Till Syndrome[2] or are allowed to misbehave.

Because of this misunderstanding, there exists an overrepresentation of black and minority youth, in particular black males, suspended from school and assigned to special education classes. This phenomenon starts in the community outside of the school where according to the National Committee on Civil Disorders, we live in separate societies -one black and one white, where whites, non-whites, minorities, middle class, and poor youngsters, for the most part, grow up not really knowing one another. Consequently, unknowing, overt, or covert ethnocentrism and racism is born, grows, develops, and is reinforced.

Interestingly, there are urban, suburban, and rural youngsters equivalent to the streetcorner youngster with whom too many teachers have problems educating. For example, in Buffalo, New York, special education students are negatively referred to as *rumps* and *woodies* by their fellow students and some teachers. In almost all suburban, rural, and urban schools these equivalent youngsters, also often in special education or suspended, are referred to as, for example, *bo bos, brews, burnouts, greasers, grubies, hard kids, heads, hoods, project kids, rats, rocks, sweathogs, titeres, or vokies*. Indeed, many of these

suburban, rural, and urban equivalents to the inner city streetcorner youngster have picked up some of black streetcorner behavior and language.

To overcome the educational bias against the streetcorner youngster and his urban, rural, and suburban equivalents, today's educators need to understand the rules, regulations, and conditions of the ritual coping and survival techniques that urban lower-class males in general and black lower-class males in particular have developed and refined in order to survive in our racist society. Indeed, the streetcorner youngster has been conditioned by his environment to act in an aggressive, physical, and sexual streetcorner way whether on the street or in the school. Therefore, educators must understand the three concerns of streetcorner behavior that must be considered in a school setting.

THREE CONCERNS OF STREETCORNER BEHAVIOR

1. The rules, regulations, and conditions of the ritual coping and survival techniques urban lower-class black men have developed and refined to survive in our ethnocentric and racist society.

2. The additional behavior involved in urban lower-economic black male streetcorner life styles:

(a) language,

(b) mode of dress,

(c) running a game,

(d) aggression (sometimes perceived as such

by middle-class blacks and whites and sometimes real)

(e) physicalness,

(f) putting someone down before he or she puts you down,

(g) the put-on or front,

(h) playing either the *cat* or the *gorilla*, or

(g) the importance for *style* and *flare* for *drama*.

3. The urban lower-economic black youngster's concept and expectation of the teacher's behavior and role as compared with his or her teacher's concept and expectation of his or her teaching role.

The language and behavior of the streetcorner is often played-out in our schools through *games* or *events*.[3] Because of the racist psycho-sexual fantasies and expectations that so many whites have about blacks in general and black men in particular, the *streetcorner behavior and language of most black males triggers a fearful threat to many teachers. As a result, many teachers misunderstand and misinterpret the streetcorner behavior of these black males resulting in black males very often being suspension or placed in special education way out of proportion to their total numbers in our schools.*

A few of the streetcorner games or events are:[3]

1. Playing the dozens - talking in a negative way about someone in the student's family, usually his or her mother.

Such behavior very often ends in a fight.

2. Ribbin'- Usually making fun of someone's clothing, body make-up, size, stature, or just about anything. The white middle-class term of "mocking out" is similar but causes fewer, if any, problems with middle-class students.

3. Signifyin'- A common form usually takes place when a student tells two different students that the other said something negative about the other. Student's will sometimes play the game on teachers.

4. Woofin'- A form of intimidation. Used by Eddie Murphy in the movie *Beverly Hill Cop* when he yelled loudly at the desk clerk to get a room for which he did not have a reservation. In essence, the clerk bought his *woof ticket*. In school, a streetcorner youngster may attempt to sell a woof ticket to a teacher by blocking his way in the hall.

5. Playing the *cat* or *gorilla* - A youngster may want, for example, a pass from a teacher. Tc get the pass, he may first try to sweet talk the teacher referring to her pretty dress. If that approach does not work, he may start yelling and throwing his body around.

It is obvious that neither a rigid-punitive nor an ignoring-passive approach to this streetcorner behavior has worked for either the student or the teacher. Furthermore, the above should not be taken as an excuse for accepting inappropriate behavior in schools.

In addition, if more teachers could understand and deal with this streetcorner behavior in a positive way, many of

these streetcorner youngsters would end up leading productive and positive lives rather than dropping out of school and ending up in jails or institutions. It is much cheaper and healthier to develop strategies appropriate to working with these streetcorner youngsters than it is use them to feed our criminal justice system.

Finally, the argument presented is that because the teacher is the *adult* and the *professional*, it is the teacher who must change his or her behavior and learn to understand the streetcorner youngster's behavior and language to help this youngster master another repertoire of language and behavior that is more appropriate for school and work settings. Such an approach will provide the streetcorner youngster with the middle-class ability to dress, speak, and behave appropriate to the social situation.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE POLICY

1. All forms of racism and ethnocentrism should be dealt with. The state should not just deal with white racism against blacks.

2. The State of New York through its various agencies should continue to strengthen and enforce laws related to open housing and jobs.

3. To be certified as a teacher, police officer, or state trooper in New York State, all should be required to take a course related to institutionalized, international, national, and local racism and ethnocentrism. The objective

of the course should not be to make whites feel guilty.

4. The State should organize a number of "retreat centers" throughout the State where students and their teachers would go for anywhere from three days to a week for a resident experience related to exercises and experiences in inter-group relationships. In addition, built into each retreat center should be experiences related to the Outward Bound type of initiative and ropes course.

5. Police, state troopers, teachers, and other governmental employees working in jobs where they deal with the public should be required to participate in on-going (coaching) in-service around racism, ethnocentrism, and prejudice.

6. There should be an annual State award program for citizens and organizations participating in exemplary activities of an interracial nature.

7. The State should promulgate, up-date, and publish regularly a listing of school and organizational community interracial programs that work.

8. The State Education Department should develop additional curriculum materials in all areas involving: (1) individualization; (2) socially acceptable risk-taking, challenge and adventure; and (3) teaching to different learning styles.

9. The State Education Department should fund a SUNY Center for the development of materials and protocols related to educating the so-called at-risk youngster. Such

a center, in addition to developing the above suggested materials and protocols, should also (1) bring staff to the center for workshops, (2) educate facilitators, and (3) disseminate the materials and protocols developed.

NOTES

[1] FOUR CATEGORIES OF STUDENTS IN INNER CITY CLASSROOMS

1. Youngsters with middle-class life style and behavior.

2. Youngsters who have adopted the behavior of the streetcorner but have the potential for middle-class behavior. There are urban, suburban, and rural youngsters who are equivalent to the inner-city streetcorner youngster.

3. Youngsters who are emotionally handicapped, physically handicapped, or both.

4. Youngsters who are entertainment and sports world oriented and youngsters who are religious or politicized.

[2] Emmett Louis Till was a 14-year-old black youngster from Chicago who, in 1955, went to Mississippi to visit with relatives. While visiting, he was lynched for not "knowing his place" in relation to a white woman. Hence, the Emmett Till Syndrome indicates a youngster being punished or disciplined out of proportion to his or her supposed inappropriate behavior.

[3] EVENTS RELATED TO STREETCORNER BEHAVIOR

1. Dozens

2. Ribbin'

3. Signifyin'
4. Shuckin' & Jivin'
5. Woofin'
6. Language (conducted)
7. Physicalness (acting out/aggressive)
8. Non-verbal kinestic features: eyes, walk, stance, & greeting
9. Mode of dress
10. Working game
11. Putting someone on

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